

Today, Christians around the world are remembering the story of Jesus' transfiguration on the mountaintop. It's a familiar story for us and it would have had immediate resonance for the original readers and hearers of the Gospels as it connects the experience and awe of the holy with the metaphor of light. That, as we heard in our reading from Exodus this morning, would have been a connection common for Jewish believers. This story makes a fitting end to our season of Epiphany, focusing as we have on the revelation of Jesus as the Light of the World.

Our passages from Exodus and Luke have something else in common as well and it is an idea that also shows up in this morning's Psalm, which we used as our Call to Worship, and in the epistle passage for this morning, II Corinthians 3:12 – 4:2, to which I'll return later. It's the idea that when confronted with the Holy, with the near presence of the divine, human beings are afraid. Psalm 99 says, "The Lord is king; let the peoples tremble!" Moses comes down from the mountain literally shining with the reflected holiness of Yahweh and the people are so afraid he has to cover his face. The Synoptic Gospels all record the same reaction of the disciples to the changed appearance of Jesus – they are afraid. How do we, a progressive group of 21st Century Christians who focus on the love of God for all creation, go about dealing with the concept that the very presence of the lover of our souls is enough to strike something very like terror into our hearts?

Part of the answer, I think, comes from contemplating or experiencing the sheer otherness of God. Contact with the limitless power of the One Who Created the Universe, the One Who Knew us in our Mothers' Wombs, is enough to stop us dead in our tracks and remind us of our own limitations, fragility and smallness. "Jesus loves me, this I know" but as the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews put it, "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God." I was in college, I think, when I was first introduced to the work of the great German theologian, Rudolf Otto and his *magnum opus*, The Idea of the Holy. Otto defines the concept of the holy as that which is numinous: a "non-rational, non-sensory experience or feeling whose primary and immediate object is outside the self." Otto also described the numinous with a Latin phrase: *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*. The holy, in Otto's view, is mysterious, wholly other from our experience. Because of the great power revealed in the holy, it is also *tremendum*, terrifying, yet at the same time *fascinans*, fascinating or charming or, if you prefer, gracious.

Do we actually have anything to fear from the gracious God Who is Love? Of course not, but to come up hard against the essential boundary between Creator and Creature is an experience that is awesome in the true sense of the word. Before we rejoice in the presence of God, we are likely to get a little weak in the knees, a little dry in the mouth, perhaps a bit lightheaded. This is a truth celebrated by our Pentecostal brothers and sisters, who are quite likely to fall out and faint, be "slain in the Spirit," as they put it, when the presence of God becomes palpable in their worship.

There is another component in this holy fear, which is best exemplified for me in Luke's story of the enormous catch of fish. Perhaps you remember it. Because of the crowds gathered to hear him preach at the shore of Galilee one morning, Jesus repairs to Peter's boat to stand off a little from shore so he can speak without being crushed. When he is finished preaching, he tells Peter to go out and let down his nets. Peter, who has been fishing without success all the preceding night, reluctantly agrees. When he draws up a net that is full to bursting with fish where there

had been none only shortly before, he is overwhelmed. He falls on his knees in the boat and exclaims, “Depart from me, because I am a sinful man, O lord.” When the light of holiness shines on us, our brokenness, our rebellion, our sinfulness is exposed. I think that’s part of what caused the fear among the Israelites at the appearance of Moses and among the disciples on the mountain. If we’ve been living in the dark, light is disorienting and dreadful, even if it is ultimately welcome. In that letter to the Corinthians I mentioned earlier, Paul talks about the experience of coming into the light: “when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed... We have renounced the shameful things that one hides; we refuse to practice cunning or to falsify God’s word; but by the open statement of the truth we commend ourselves to the conscience of everyone in the sight of God.”

That awareness of one’s own failings, followed by a new understanding of God’s love and a release from the bonds of brokenness is beautifully exemplified by the story of John Newton. Newton was born in 1725, the son of a merchant sea captain. He joined his father at sea at age 11 and sailed with him until his father retired. When he was 19, John Newton was pressed into service in the Royal Navy, an experience he found so intolerable that he deserted. He was captured, demoted and flogged and finally given over to service in a slave ship. He found the life of a slaver to be more lucrative and more to his liking and rose in the ranks to become a captain. He was, by his own admission, typical of the slavers of the day, cruel and vicious with his human cargo while on duty, a libertine on shore.

But life began to change for Newton during a storm at sea. Newton experienced what he was to later call a “great deliverance.” He wrote in his journal that when all seemed lost and all thought the ship would surely sink, he exclaimed, “Lord, have mercy upon us.” The storm subsided and Newton went to his cabin and began to read that classic of Christian devotion, The Imitation of Christ by Thomas á Kempis. For the rest of his life, he observed the date of the storm, May 10, 1748, as the date of his conversion. Not everything in his life changed immediately, though. He continued as a slaver for seven years, although he rationalized this to himself by ensuring that the slaves he transported were humanely treated during their voyage. In 1755, after a serious illness, he retired from the sea and became surveyor of tides in Liverpool. There he heard the preaching of the great orator George Whitefield, co-founder with the Wesley brothers of the Methodist movement. With the encouragement of Whitefield and the Wesleys, Newton took up studies of Hebrew and Greek. In 1764, he was ordained a priest in the Church of England and began 15 years as pastor of the church in Olney. The combination of his personal story and his preaching skills made him famous and the church building had to be expanded. While in Olney, he also began to write hymns, drawing on his own experience of what Otto later called the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*. “’Twas grace that taught my heart to fear, and grace my fears relieved; how precious did that grace appear the hour I first believed.” According to Newton, “only God’s amazing grace could and would take a rude, profane, slave-trading sailor and transform him into a child of God.”

Newton spent the last twenty-eight years of his life as pastor of St. Mary Woolnoth Church in London, where his congregation included some of the most influential politicians and leaders of the day. He preached until the very end of his life, even though he had gone blind and was in poor health. He said, when he was 82, “My memory is nearly gone, but I remember two things, that I am a great sinner, and that Christ is a great Saviour.”

One of Newton's parishioners at St. Mary Woolnoth was a young man who was deeply affected by Newton's stories of slavery and repentance. William Wilberforce was a rising young Member of Parliament, a close friend of William Pitt the younger. At age 24, Pitt became Great Britain's youngest Prime Minister ever. Wilberforce often consulted with Newton, especially when he was disgusted with politics. At one point, in 1785, Wilberforce asked Newton if he should leave Parliament to become a pastor. Newton told him no, that he had been sent to Parliament by God to help abolish slavery. Wilberforce became the leader of the abolition movement and often recruited Newton to speak against the evils of slavery. In 1807, shortly before Newton's death, Wilberforce and his party succeeded in convincing Parliament to abolish the slave trade and, in 1833, just three days before Wilberforce's own death, Parliament abolished slavery throughout the British Empire. Clearly, God was working in many hearts to achieve this landmark of human freedom but it is not hard to think of the catalyst as being that stormy night at sea when the young John Newton cried out for mercy from God and found it.

It's a good story, the story of Newton and Wilberforce and, indeed, a movie entitled "Amazing Grace" that repeats the story is about to be released. That event has spurred several organizations to call for Christians across the United States to remember Newton and Wilberforce today. Those organizations include World Vision, whose 30-Hour Famine our youth have participated in for many years. The point of this remembrance is that despite the work of men like Newton and Wilberforce and that Act of Parliament 200 years ago, slavery is still very much alive in our world. In June of last year, the U.S. State Department released a report entitled, "Trafficking in Persons," which said, in part: "A wide range of estimates exists on the scope and magnitude of modern-day slavery, both internal and transnational. The International Labor Organization (ILO)—the United Nations (UN) agency charged with addressing labor standards, employment and social protection issues—estimates that are 12.3 million people in forced labor, bonded labor, forced child labor, and sexual servitude at any given time; other estimates range from 4 million to 27 million."

Children are especially vulnerable in the modern world of slavery. UNICEF estimates that 126 million children worldwide are involved in what they call "the worst forms of child labor." That's one in every twelve of the world's five to seventeen year olds. UNICEF, the BBC and Amnesty International have also estimated that some 300,000 child soldiers are involved in wars around the world, some of them younger than 10 years old. ChildVoice, one of the organizations participating in promoting Amazing Grace Sunday, tells the story of one such child on their website: "Whether in the U.S. or in countries such as Uganda, most fifth graders spent last summer escaping the rigors of school and enjoying the activities of a lazy summer vacation. Not James, an 11-year-old boy from northern Uganda. An abducted child kept as a slave in the Lord's Resistance Army, he was forced to brutally kill his own brother who had been abducted with him. He was rescued from captivity, but demonstrates the fragile psyche of a child victim forced to kill or be killed. James is now in a transit center in Lira, and the details of his abduction and captivity are just beginning to emerge from his silence. His deadened eyes and unwilling tongue betray the horror of recent months, when he was one of three brothers abducted by LRA rebels from their village. When one of his younger brothers tried to escape, the rebels pronounced a sentence of death as punishment as an example to other abducted children who would consider escape. The rebel leaders designated James and the third brother to execute their

sibling using means too horrific to detail here. Adding to the horror, sometime later when James picked up a piece of cassava to chew on without permission, his overseer cut off part of his ear as punishment. James was rescued in an army raid, but he is traumatized by the abuse of his captors, and although now free he needs enormous emotional and spiritual help if he is to recover and lead a productive life.”

Just in case this horrible story sounds too far away to concern us here, it's worth noting that the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Foreign Affairs has released a report estimating that 17,500 foreign nationals are trafficked into the U.S. every year to serve as hidden slaves. If you watch “Boston Legal” on television on Tuesday nights, you may have seen a dramatization of one such story last week. Some well-to-do Haitian nationals who immigrate to the U.S. are bringing with them their *restavecs*, poor children whom they buy from their desperate parents and raise as household slaves with no rights, no recourse and nowhere to run.

As part of Amazing Grace Sunday and in imitation of William Wilberforce who used the same technique to convince Parliament to abolish slavery in Britain, the coalition of organizations involved are circulating a petition to be delivered to lawmakers here in America. It reads, “We, the undersigned, affirm the inherent dignity and worth of all people and the right of every child and adult to live free from slavery and involuntary servitude. We call upon world leaders to commit themselves to the abolition of slavery around the world. Let our signatures demonstrate our desire to see the emancipation of slaves and accountability for slave masters and others who benefit from the enslavement of people.” I have signed the petition and I invite you this morning to add your signature to the copies on these clipboards. More information is available from websites, which I have listed on the back of the bulletin.

For some of us here this morning, these stories may be the first exposure we have had to the evil of modern slavery. Yet on some level, I imagine that nearly all of us understand the feeling of enslavement. We are privileged to live in a great country, where we and our children and grandchildren grow up without the fear of physical slavery, but there are still spiritual forces that can ensnare and enslave us: addictions, greeds, lusts, angers, prides, fears. Hank Williams, the famous country singer who wrote the rollicking hymn we sang earlier, “I Saw the Light,” died young as a slave to addictions. In II Corinthians 3:17, Paul reminds us that “where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.” We also sang this morning asking God to “keep us from our great temptation... lead us down those daily pathways where our love is not confined.” Give us that spiritual freedom, O Lord! Help us to see the light! Paul goes on to promise to the Corinthians and to us, “All of us... are being transformed into the same image (of God) from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit.” Let us not forget, when we are most feeling our brokenness, when we like Newton feel like wretches before God, that we are made in God's image, that from the very beginning, our loving God has planned and looked forward to the day when we will be in God's presence, rejoicing in our abundant life. Many years after Newton's death, an unknown lyricist added a verse to his great hymn: “When we've been there ten thousand years, bright shining as the sun...” That is our destiny under the love of God through Christ Jesus our Lord. Just like Moses, just like Jesus, our faces will shine bright with the presence and the love of God. Amazing grace! How sweet the sound! Thanks to the light of our holy God, we can see and in that light is freedom and beauty and love. Thanks be to God!